

Jane Blumenthal, AHIP Medical Library Association President, 2012–2013

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Becoming Jane: a Profile of Medical Library Association President Jane Blumenthal

You can learn a lot about Jane Blumenthal, AHIP, from a quick tour of her office on the fifth floor of the Taubman Health Sciences Library. An entire wall of windows looks out to the University of Michigan Medical School, and beyond

that you can see the new Cardiovascular Center and the manicured grounds where the Kresge building complex, part of which housed the old medical library, was torn down two years ago. Beyond that, and towering over every other building in the visible landscape, is the even newer C. S. Mott Children's Hospital and Von Voigtlander Women's Hospital. Within the office, diagonal from the desk, is a wood screen with

a series of animal photos taken while she was on trips around the world. A framed close-up of a red-tailed hawk signed by the nature photographer, Jane Blumenthal, hangs on one wall. Collections of various types—cactus plants, ticket stubs to the Bearded Pigs and Oakland Raiders Super Bowl events, Beanie Babies of the jungle animal and bird variety, and a collection of children's books (*Librarian from the Black Lagoon*, *Bat Night at the Library*, and *Please Bury Me in the Library*)—adorn the furniture and walls. Research assistant Stephanie Gertken says that, "overall, the office gives you a sense of a person who finds delight in the world around her whether that be through a camera lens, a bobble penguin toy, or a quirky cartoon" [1].

Visionary

From her window on the world, Jane sees this as a "pivotal time" in the profession where there are organizational pressures brought about by a confluence of social, economic, and technological changes amid concerns from librarians who have faced positions being eliminated and, in the worst cases, their libraries being completely closed: "as individuals and as a professional association, we are being challenged to change, and if we don't step up to that challenge, we won't be here in the future" [2]. Since she is motivated by challenges, not complacency, Jane is undaunted: "It's actually a time of tremendous opportunity, *if* we want to take advantage of the opportunities" [2].

She is hopeful that, as MLA president this year, she can make a difference: "There are already many people who have the same concerns, and I really hope I can make the case to others that we need to push the agenda along a little faster. Patience is not one of my virtues" [2]. Those who have worked with

her closely know that one of her secrets to moving an agenda forward is that she does not get bogged down in details presenting as obstacles—it is the end product that most matters, not the nuances of the process to reaching it.

Jane's presidential priorities are designed to confront some of the major challenges in the profession head-on, including (1) creating a new vision of health sciences librarianship and (2) expanding the membership base to include other related disciplines outside the library profession:

We should do new things, take risks, and develop new tools. We should strengthen the organization as well as the membership by expanding the definition of what constitutes health sciences librarianship. At the same time, we should welcome practitioners from related fields into our membership, whether or not they fall into this expanded definition. [2]

Jane's perspective on the direction health sciences libraries need to be moving in was informed by her experiences at Georgetown University, where she worked from 1990 to 2006. Georgetown was her first entree into an academic medical library. She held several different positions on her way to becoming director in 1997. At Georgetown, after being appointed assistant dean for knowledge management in 2000, she became part of the team of the dean of the School of Medicine, and she began to see how libraries needed to change in response to other driving forces in the environment. She attended the Harvard Macy Institute for Leaders in Medical Education in 2003, "a very immersive experience which helped transform my perspective and solidified that I was a significant part of the Dean's team" [2]. Her experience in the library at Georgetown gave her the opportunity to build a strong and progressive group of librarians who, in turn, also worked well together: "They understood; they got the vision; we were a team; and things just clicked" [2].

It was during her time at Georgetown that Jane also began to be more involved in the Medical Library Association (MLA). She served as chair of the Leadership and Management Section in 2004–2005 and as chair of the 2008 National Program Committee (NPC). Becoming NPC chair was her introduction to MLA on the national level. She learned about the inner workings of professional organizations: "NPC was the most fun thing I'd done in MLA—it was challenging, interesting, and different, and provided an opportunity to work with MLA leadership and headquarters staff. It was great background when I became a member of the board the following year" [2].

Change agent

At the Harvard Macy Institute, Jane was exposed to Clayton Christensen's *Innovators Dilemma*, which became one of the main influences informing her point of view on how libraries should be organized [3]. It is the book in which "good enough pushes out excellent" [2]. From it, she learned that librarians have to realize when to give up traditional practices and doing everything perfectly in order to do more things, perhaps imperfectly, but of greater benefit and more importance to their primary audience. "It's painful decision-making—as distinct from bad decision-making—where you have to give something up you consider of value in order to do something else both more important and more relevant" [2]. An example is mediated searching:

If physicians can do their own searches that are good enough to get them the 1–2 articles they need, then why have librarians doing more time-consuming, costlier searches? This way of thinking moves the library away from focusing on precise, detailed organizing to see the big picture and to make decisions where good enough is just that: good enough. It emphasizes what librarians can bring to the table that no one else can and brings value to that. When you analyze it, you find that the "not-as-good" meets the audience need, even if it doesn't meet the need of the producer or creator. [2]

Jane's point of view is consistent with the ideas expressed by T. Scott Plutchak, AHIP, in his Janet Doe lecture [4]. Her focus is not that of yesterday, not on building great libraries by building great collections, but rather is that of today: answering the clear call for relevancy and building meaningful collaborations by fostering the development of librarians to fully function as peer-partners in the health sciences enterprise.

It is a vision she has enacted ever since becoming director, Taubman Health Sciences Library, at the University of Michigan in 2006. Upon her arrival, Jane instituted a number of new initiatives, including integrating the three separate health sciences libraries into a unified presence and establishing a research and informatics unit, an outreach program, and a new model for liaison services. Liaison librarian Anna Ercoli Schnitzer explains the impact:

Jane is a person who seems to have a sixth sense of the possible. When nobody else seems to see the possibility of a project, Jane does, and she encourages appropriate and interested staff members to move forward with it. Her ability to successfully obtain funding for projects is exemplified by the fact that a number of subcontracts have been received from the National Network of Libraries of Medicine, Greater Midwest Region; in fact, Taubman Health Sciences Library received three subcontracts at one time with unique partnership opportunities and populations that we had not previously worked with. Jane's foresight and courage in pursuing the idea of multiple partnerships and simultaneously engaging in several major endeavors is a reflection of her innovative skills and her vision. [5]

Risk-taker/collaborator

At Michigan, as a champion of collaboration with health sciences constituencies, Jane not only "talks the talk," but also "walks the walk" in terms of taking risks and building collaborations. This is apparent to all, including newcomers like Judith Smith, who

recently joined the Taubman team as a liaison librarian from a previous position at Johns Hopkins:

In my brief time working with Jane, I'm struck by the way she facilitates a culture conducive to innovation and risk taking, and values bringing on staff with a diverse range of skills. Her actions and outlook enable staff at Taubman to reach out broadly across campus to partner with and embed library and information services and resources into a wide variety of units. [6]

Jane is leading the health sciences library's partnership with the Medical School and other health sciences schools to re-vision the physical space of the library. She is a member of the Facilities Planning Committee that is overseeing the design of the library into a state-of-the-art health sciences educational resource. Rajesh Mangrulkar, associate dean for medical student education, who has himself been an exemplary advocate of collaborative partnerships with the library, finds a kindred spirit in the conceptual planning of the new building with Jane's expertise:

I remember when Jane first was being interviewed for the position at University of Michigan. I thought at dinner, this is someone very different from any of the other candidates—she thinks broadly, about curriculum, systems of higher education, transformative technologies.

Jane and I have really worked closely as we restructure the Library space to reflect advanced, new pedagogical learning principles. Since the beginning of the process, Jane has been a wonderful partner in this project, embracing a model of social and collaborative learning, interdisciplinary work, and cutting edge concepts on the use of information at the point-of-care. She is truly a librarian of the 21st century! [7]

Jane is also building connections with faculty in the School of Information. Tiffany Veinot, assistant professor of information and of health behavior and health education, is a collaborative partner in a broad array of initiatives:

I have been fortunate to work with Jane since I joined the University of Michigan as an Assistant Professor of Information in 2008. In this time, I have been privileged to collaborate with Jane in a number of capacities: instruction, program design and research. In all of this work, she demonstrates a remarkable commitment to health librarianship, new and future professionals, multidisciplinary collaboration and service innovation. Jane has now acted as a guest speaker in my classes on management and leadership four times, and in doing so, always deeply inspires and challenges students to lead from whatever positions they may hold in organizations.

Jane has also been involved in establishing a new health informationist pathway at the School of Information, and in so doing, has contributed her considerable insights as to the challenges and opportunities facing the profession, and how innovative education models can create new opportunities in the field. Jane has also been a valued advisor to my research project about how families use health information to deal with chronic illness. In this project, Jane has been a key voice in helping the research team to consider implications of the research for information services and systems. Through all of this work, I have come to realize that Jane is always generous, a trusted collaborator, a creative thinker and a catalyst for change. The MLA could not have chosen a better leader. [8]

Mentor

Jane relishes being a mentor. She has been a mentor for the Academy of Health Information Professionals since 2002, been a preceptor and project director for three National Library of Medicine (NLM) Second Year Associate Fellowships, and participated as a mentor in the NLM/ Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL) Leadership Fellows Program, 2005–2006. In addition to formal mentoring programs, she also mentors librarians and student assistants informally. Health informationist intern Katy Mahraj says,

Jane impressed upon me the need for health sciences librarians not to

be defined or tied to a specific place and to take on new roles in systematic review, teaching in the curriculum, and participating in teams. She emphasized the fundamental importance for health sciences librarians to understand the information needs of the people they seek to help. We also talked about career advice, and Jane provided helpful insights for my decision-making process, including the importance of focusing on the skills I would gain and the importance of management experience. [9]

Anne K. Seymour, a former colleague from Georgetown, notes Jane's sustained guidance as her mentor:

Jane was a significant guide and mentor as I was beginning my career in a new profession and new city. In addition to our professional relationship we also became neighbors and soon after carpool buddies. Anyone who has experienced the traffic inside and outside the DC beltway can understand what a bonding experience carpooling can provide. On our daily commute from Falls Church, Virginia, we (Jane, her husband Don and I) had great discussions and attempted to solve the problems of the Library, the University, the federal government and the world. And I believe that the time was valuable to Jane too. Hopefully I wasn't just viewed as the third person in the car allowing us on the HOV (high occupancy vehicle) lane!

Although I only was under Jane's formal directorship for one week before I left for a new position in Philadelphia, I informally continued to seek her advice and counsel and this has been invaluable to me. From our earliest encounters I knew that Jane was on a path to become a leader in our profession and in our professional organizations, as well as to continue maintaining a safe driving record! [10]

Janette Shaffer, AHIP, another colleague from Georgetown, credits Jane's mentorship for her career successes:

Jane Blumenthal's mentorship made my time working with her at Dahlgren Library one of professional growth; I attribute much of my subsequent success to the lessons I've learned from her. Jane taught

me the art of making proposals—be bold when requesting and gracious when turning them down. She taught me the art of transparency and trust—give your staff the tools and information they need, then step away and let them do their work. She always took the time to explain the school's or her reasoning for certain decisions, giving us, her relatively new management team, a better foundation for our own decision-making, trusting that we would get it right. When, occasionally, we didn't, she helped us navigate through the issues and move on to our next endeavor. I wouldn't have missed my time with Jane and wouldn't be where I am without her. [11]

With Jane's championing of new roles for health sciences librarians, staff development is a cornerstone of her mentoring approach, as indicated by Deborah L. Lauseng, coordinator of liaison services at Taubman Health Sciences Library:

While she was asking the librarians and staff to rethink our role within the academic, clinical, and research arenas, she also challenged us to consider what professional development needs we had to become successful in these efforts. The results of Jane's encouragement and active support of professional development for all her staff has benefited individuals moving into advanced and newly defined roles, as well as provided liaisons with greater leadership opportunities in their work. [12]

Famous Janes

On the web, there are a number of sites noting "famous Janes," famous women with the first name of Jane, and even quizzes you can take to test your knowledge of famous Janes [13]. Of these other Janes, the ones who most resonate with Jane herself are Jane Addams, in particular for her "streak of idealism and social activism," and Jane Austen, though Jane has never sported the bumper sticker "I'd rather be reading Jane Austen" on her car. [2]. Instead, her bumper sticker reads, "Always fasten your seat belts as it makes

it harder for the aliens to suck you out of your car" [2]. What she most likes about Jane Austen is her ability to find humor in the absurdities around her and to rejoice in them, she has always liked comedies of manner and seeing the absurdities of life. Jane's favorite heroine from the Austen novels is Elizabeth Bennet, because "she's at center stage, has a sardonic sense of humor, doesn't let any other person or society at large define her, and overcomes adversity to achieve a successful outcome" [2].

Jane met her husband Don online, although not on the Internet per se. They met on a local bulletin board system chat room, talking about religion (her major in college), philosophy, and current events. She says that she and Don have the same sense of humor. Don says they also share an interest in football. Don is a part-time scout for the Oakland Raiders, and Jane has participated in Coach Carr's Women's Football Academy at Michigan, part of a fundraising event for the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center. Don notes that "Jane is an avid traveler, but not necessarily a typical tourist. She has been known to scuba dive, take helicopter and submarine rides, walk down from the top of Masada to the base, and go who knows where with birding guides" [14]. Her love of nature is chronicled on her website [15]. Don has a photo of her feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square, with birds landing on her head and arms and with a London tour book clearly visible in her jacket pocket.

Some of Jane's favorite vacation spots are Costa Rica, Rome, and the Southwestern United States. She loves to travel, whether for bird watching, experiencing the different terrains and ecosystems of exotic locales, or attending MLA meetings. At MLA, she always finds the best restaurants, as M. J. Tooey, AHIP, FMLA, executive director, Health Sciences and Human Services Library, University of Maryland, can attest:

I don't remember when I first met Jane but I certainly got to know her

when she came to work at the Dahlgren Library at Georgetown. I remember her jumping right into the life of the academic health sciences library community. But more importantly, I found out that Jane is a "foodie" and enjoys fine dining. So some of my most memorable times with Jane, discussing library issues and the future of the profession of course, were over wonderful meals in the cities where we have had meetings. She is a wonderful dining companion and I am sure along the way, we have solved all the problems of the world. [16]

Presidential style predictors

At Michigan, there are those of us who consider this the "golden age" for libraries and librarians with Jane's leadership as director of the Taubman Health Sciences Library and Paul N. Courant's as university librarian and dean of libraries. Paul, who himself can be considered an authority on library transformation, shares these thoughts about Jane:

On first meeting, Jane Blumenthal comes across as being all business, and this impression can last quite a while, because she is surpassingly good at her business. She has led the transformation of the Taubman Medical Library to the Taubman Health Sciences Library, demonstrating an essential combination of iron will and political skill in moving the library and the schools that are its main clients into a world where collaboration trumps competition, at least mostly. She has an uncanny habit of getting to things first, so that conversations that I have with faculty in the health sciences concerning library matters often end as they begin, with the faculty member noting that she or he has already talked with Jane and good things are happening.

But it turns out that Jane is not all business. She has an inexplicable passion for the Oakland Raiders, and when you watch her in action, you can see the kind of swashbuckling style that goes with the Raiders. At Michigan we never joke about piracy in the library, but swashbuckling is in bounds, and Jane carries her Raiders paraphernalia with panache. And that sums it up: what-

ever Jane takes on, she gets done, quickly and in style. [17]

Jean P. Shipman, AHIP, FMLA, director, Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library, University of Utah, and longtime friend and colleague also foresees Jane's presidential manner and style:

What always has impressed me about Jane is her natural style and calm air. She just seems to take things in stride and to enjoy life. I especially witnessed this when I was invited to her library to give a presentation on health literacy as part of a training workshop that was being offered to her University. I recall that Jane had organized my visit with finesse and had ensured that all travel details were addressed; she even invited me to stay at her wonderful home. We had a charming visit where I got her cat to sit on my lap to make me feel a part of the household. That's how I always feel around Jane—part of her family. I'm sure she will extend this warm welcome to MLA members during her time as president. [18]

Conclusion

In the process of becoming MLA president this year and becoming even more of a leader in health sciences librarianship, Jane will assuredly focus on helping others to be an active, vital part of MLA, and in doing so, to work toward becoming their best professional selves.

Jane may be the counterpoint to the elegiac lament from Thomas G. Basler, FMLA, for the library leaders of the past, the giants of yesteryear, in his thought-provoking Janet Doe lecture [19]. Jane's gaze is facing forward, and as a spokesperson for the health sciences library of the future, she may

very well be on her way to becoming one of "the great ones."

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